

ACCESS AMERICA

Young People Run for Office Seeking To Affect Policy



Michael Sessions campaigns for mayor of Hillsdale, Michigan, at age 18, in October 2005. (© AP Images)

Washington -- On the campaign trail, Sam Rasoul, a Democratic candidate for Congress in western Virginia, often is asked the same question first: "How old are you?" The 26-year-old says he routinely is asked why he is

running for Congress at such a young age.

"I tell them I am running for Congress because I am young," Rasoul told *USINFO* in a recent interview. "I have more invested in the future than the people sitting up there on Capitol Hill right now."

While young Americans often are criticized for not voting, many are showing that young people can be political leaders despite their age.

Rasoul will have to defeat an eight-term congressman to win the Virginia 6th Congressional District seat. He sees his campaign as an opportunity to talk to students. "If they can see someone from their own genera-

Also in this issue

Young People Run for Office.....	2
From the Ambassador..	3
From the IRC.....	2
Program Announcements.....	2
Alumni Spotlight.....	3
Students Embracing Political Process.....	4
Calendar.....	4

tion ... trying to become involved ... maybe that can be a source of inspiration for them," he said.

While talking with students, Rasoul has learned that "they don't care about Republicans or Democrats. What they do care about is issues -- especially how issues directly affect them." "If you care about these issues," Rasoul said, "you need to be in-

From the Ambassador

Across the world, young people play a dynamic, creative role in countries seeking political progress. In America, we actively encourage young people to engage in the political process and to take an active part in the society in which they live. Whether through student government, community activism, or elections, young citizens can make a positive difference in their own lives and that of their communities.

One example of a young American making a political difference is Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz. Congresswoman Wasserman Schultz is a dynamic individual who embraced politics at a young age. Active in student politics at the University of Florida, Wasserman Schultz went on to run for the Florida State Legislature at the age of 26 and became the youngest woman ever to hold a seat in the legislature. After serving for eight years, she ran for and won election to the Florida State Senate and in 2005 she was sworn in as a member of the US House of Representatives. Speaking to a group of young people, Wasserman Schultz once said, "Everyone has to participate if our government is truly going to be a reflection of the people it is intended to represent. Therefore, the single most important thing you all can do to strengthen and improve your community is to engage yourselves and others in the political process."

--Robert F. Godec

From the IRC

Visit the IRC to consult these internet sites, videos, and books on elections in the U.S.

Links

Can I Vote?

<http://www.canivote.org/>

CIRCLE: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement

<http://www.civicyouth.org/>

Generation Engage

<http://www.generationengage.org/>

Videos

"Participation in Democracy" 1998

"Political Participation" 1994

"Voting and Political Participation"

Books

Beyond the electoral connection: a reassessment of the role of voting in contemporary American politics
Shienbaum, Kim Ezra

Campaigns and elections American style
Kelley, Stanley

La démocratie américaine à l'épreuve : Le test de l'élection
2000
Lassale, J. Pierre

Continued from PAGE 1

volved in politics -- because politics is everything."

YOUNG AMERICANS RUN TOWNS, CITIES

If elected, Rasoul would be one of the youngest members of Congress in history. But young Americans' involvement in politics dates back to the country's earliest days. Twelve of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence were 35 or younger. The youngest person ever elected to the House of Representatives was William Charles Cole Claiborne, who was elected in 1797 at the age of 22. Technically, he was in violation of the Constitution, which sets the age for serving in the House at 25.



Then-Cleveland Mayor Dennis Kucinich in November 1977. Today Kucinich is a congressman and presidential candidate. (© AP Images)

Rasoul would not be the only under-30 leader in U.S. politics. In early November, Pittsburgh's Luke Ravenstahl, the country's youngest big-city mayor, won re-election at age 27. Previously serving as Pittsburgh's City Council president, Ravenstahl became mayor in September 2006 when the then-serving mayor died in office.

Though they may not lead cities as large, there are many mayors serving at even younger ages.

At age 20, Michael Sessions leads the 8,200-person town of Hillsdale, Michigan. He won the position in 2005 while he was still in high school. At age 18, Sessions defeated the incumbent mayor in a write-in campaign. He had to run a write-in campaign because he was only 17 at the time of the deadline to get his name on the ballot, too young to qualify for inclusion.

Sessions, now a college sophomore, told *USINFO* that among the highlights of being mayor is the ability to represent your fellow citizens and set policies that will affect the future.

PROGRAM ANNOUNCEMENTS

Study of the United States Institutes for Scholars

- Secondary Educators
- Religious Pluralism in the U.S.
- Contemporary American Literature
- U.S. Foreign Policy
- American Civilization
- Journalism and Media
- American Politics and Political Thought



To learn more, go to <http://tunis.usembassy.gov/>; e-mail benkhedherf@state.gov; or call Mme Ben Khedher at 71-107-438

Continued from PAGE 2

Because of their age, Sessions said, young leaders are not embedded in any political network, allowing them to form their own opinions about policies to enact and people to trust. This can mean that the people they come to trust are different from those who have been in power a long time, which provides an opportunity for new leadership.

After his victory, Sessions quickly learned that as such a young mayor, he would be not only a leader of his town, but also an example for young people around the world.

A week after the election, he found a satellite truck from a Japanese television station parked outside his parents' home – the television crew thought Sessions' story would send a message to Japanese teenagers that "they can make a difference. ... It's just tearing down the barriers and trying to get involved," Sessions said.

"They thought it was unique that a younger person stepped up and said, 'Hey look, I want to make a difference here.' I might not have all the education, but I don't know if that's a prerequisite for getting involved," Sessions said. Media from many other countries came to Hillsdale as well.

In summer 2007, Sessions addressed the International Leadership Summit of the Americas in Quito, Ecuador. He told other young leaders that they can affect the future simply by "showing that you want to make a difference in your community, that you want to make a difference in your country."

Young people "are the future of your country," Sessions told the young leaders. "So you need to start shaping it now and get involved somehow."

Many of those young people could have long political careers ahead of them. Democrat Joe Biden first won his Delaware Senate seat defeating an incumbent at age 29, becoming one of the youngest senators in U.S. history. When Democrat Dennis Kucinich was elected mayor of Cleveland at age 31 in 1977, he was then the youngest big-city mayor. Today, both are running for president.

(USINFO is produced by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



Khaled Koubba

Leaders for Democracy Fellowship

Home in the United States

Syracuse, NY (1 month); Washington, DC (3 months)

Home in Tunisia

Tunis

Fondest memory of the U.S.

Birthday fest we organized for four persons from our group born in the same week.

Briefly describe your experience

We began our program with a very special week where we met Dr. Condoleezza Rice, Mr. Tony Snow - White House Press Secretary - and visited places where internal and external policy is being made and governed. We survived a cold but fun Syracuse winter thanks to the Syracuse people's warm welcome. We got a very instructive educational part in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs thanks to the high level of lecturer and the Executive Education Program team. My internship with the Internet Society was also a big success for my professional career, as they gave me the opportunity and the needed support to attend training, events, and meet high level people.

Lessons learned

That we can learn a lot by hearing each other and focusing on the joint interests.

Continued from PAGE 3

Advice for others

Organize yourself months before going by contacting as many people as possible from organizations that your interested in.

What I miss most about the U.S.

Friends I met through this period.

American College Students Embracing U.S. Political Process

Campus Democratic and Republican clubs see membership climb



Hundreds of NYU students attended a speech by Senator Barack Obama at Washington Square Park. (© AP Images)

New York -- New York University's (NYU's) Washington Square Park address meant that when senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama spoke in the park September 27, hundreds of NYU students were among the 24,000 supporters and curious onlookers. "Having a Democratic presidential candidate in our backyard is something to be excited about," said NYU College Democrats treasurer Neil Schecter. Members of the Col-

lege Democrats at other New York-area universities showed up as well to learn more about a campaign that is reaching out to young voters.

On campuses across the country, university students are joining branches of College Republicans or College Democrats to participate in the political process. Some have a longstanding interest in politics, while others are motivated by the 2008 presidential candidates to become involved for the first time.



Senator John McCain meets with students at Francis Marion University in South Carolina. (© AP Images)

Republican and Democratic students will engage in vigorous debates over the coming months, imitating the political candidates they support, and perhaps practicing for future careers in politics.

Across the country, students are paying attention as presidential candidates court young voters.

(USINFO is produced by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)

Calendar

Free English Conversation Every Thursday

American Corner at AMIDEAST

1:00 PM

Weekly discussion on topics from films and music to religion. Topics are posted weekly in the American Corner and at AMIDEAST.

Study in the USA Consultations

Every Tuesday-Friday

Browse materials from U.S. universities; consult resources on applications and scholarships.

Open Access

Every Monday-Friday

American Corner at AMIDEAST
10:00 AM-6:00 PM

Peruse books and magazines in English on topics from history to pop culture and more.

American Corner at AMIDEAST

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